

The Federal Communications Commission must take a strong stand in defense of Net Neutrality. The Internet is and always was intended to be an open and neutral network. Right now, the FCC is crafting rules that will decide whether it stays that way.

Because of Net Neutrality, consumers have had unfettered access to new content and ideas online; our preferences and choices have determined which new ideas succeed and which don't.

Net Neutrality simply means "no discrimination," and this user-powered architecture is the reason the Internet has become such a powerful engine for consumer choice and democratic empowerment.

These protections have worked brilliantly. For two decades, the Internet thrived on openness. It became a competitive market in the truest sense. Under Net Neutrality, doctoral students working out of their dorm room created Google; college students started Facebook; a Pez hobbyist invented eBay; an Israeli teenager wrote the code for instant messaging.

These innovators started small and used the Internet's level playing field to become major forces in the new media marketplace. Their ideas have disrupted the status quo of information gatekeepers to usher in an era where content and consumers are king.

Their success stories have shown that innovation flourishes in an open marketplace where ideas rise and fall on their own merits. Remove Net Neutrality, and this marketplace tilts in favor of the phone and cable companies that control the connection to your home.

Without a non-discrimination rule the phone and cable companies will seek to control the content that flows through that connection as well.

ISPs Aren't the Internet

What have companies like AT&T, Comcast and Verizon contributed to the culture of openness and consumer choice upon which a free-flowing Web depends?

The answer is: very little.

They have gone a long way, however, toward dismantling the Internet's openness, undercutting consumer choice and hiking their fees for connections that are far slower than what's available to users in Europe and parts of Asia.

Net Neutrality opponents argue that the Internet has prospered without regulation. But they won't tell you that until recently, the Internet had baseline consumer protections written into law.

Under intense corporate lobbying, the FCC during the Bush administration removed the longstanding "open access" requirements that encouraged competition, putting net neutrality in jeopardy.

Instead of the dozens of providers operating during the days of dial-up, now you're lucky if there are two choices for high-speed Internet -- the cable or phone company -- which control 97 percent of the residential broadband market.

The top executives of these companies have made clear their intention to change the Internet forever. In the Washington Post, BusinessWeek, the Wall Street Journal and reports to shareholders, they spoke of plans to become the Internet's gatekeepers. In 2007, the largest home broadband provider, Comcast, got caught secretly blocking consumers' access to lawful file-sharing applications and was censured by the FCC.

Breaking the Internet

Companies such as Comcast, AT&T and Verizon want to change the way the Internet has always worked. By eliminating Net Neutrality, they would remove the Internet's most basic tenet: the freedom to innovate without asking permission.

This change would be a disaster for consumers and producers of Internet content. The egalitarian Internet is far too valuable and successful to be sacrificed to create uncertain streams of new revenue for a highly profitable phone and cable cartel.

That's why every major consumer group in the country and everyone from MoveOn.org and the Christian Coalition to the Teamsters and the American Library Association have expressed support for net neutrality. So have President Barack Obama, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, congressional Democrats and Republicans, and a majority at the FCC.

Why Net Neutrality must remain the law on the Information Superhighway

Without strong anti-discrimination rules, phone and cable companies will have the incentive and ability to shut the doors on our 40-year experiment with open media and economic innovation. Without forward-thinking broadband policies, America's economy will suffer.

The big companies and their lobbyists -- and the phony grassroots groups they've created to give their arguments a populist sheen -- are pulling out all the stops to confuse the issue and water down the rules.

This must not be allowed to happen. The Federal Communications Commission must take a strong stand in defense of Net Neutrality.